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ABSTRACT

The testing of grammar is one of the mainstays of language testing, since it can be argued that a basic knowledge of grammar underlies the ability to use language to express meaning. The most common way of testing grammatical knowledge is the multiple-choice test, and the most common multiple-choice item is one in which the student selects a word to complete the sentence correctly. Students can also be asked to select the correct response to an utterance or to choose the most equivalent statement. Error correction items are also useful in testing grammar. A traditional way to test knowledge of word order is to present alternative word orders and ask the student to select the best. Understanding of appropriate sentence order can be tested in the same way. Still another type of grammar test item uses transformations in which the test taker constructs new sentences that have the same meaning as the original sentence. Sentence combining exercises also play a part in grammar testing. While the testing of grammar is limited in that it does not guarantee that the test taker can use the grammatical knowledge in real communication, it is sometimes necessary and useful. In constructing a grammar test, the teacher must consider the ease of marking, the degree of control, and the degree of realism. (SLD)

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# Testing Grammar

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The testing of grammar is one of the mainstays of language testing. While such tests test the ability to either recognize or produce correct grammar and usage, they do not test the ability to use the language to express meaning. However, it can be argued that a basic knowledge of grammar underlies the ability to use language to express meaning, and so grammar tests do have an important part to play in language programs.

## Types of Tests

### Multiple Choice Tests

Probably the most common way of testing grammatical knowledge is the multiple choice test. These tests have the advantage of being easy to grade and being able to cover a lot of grammatical points quickly.

The most common type of multiple choice grammatical item is one in which the test maker gives the testee a sentence with a blank and four or five choices of a word or phrase which completes the sentence correctly. For example,

Because my mother was sick, I _____ to go home last week.
a) had
b) have
c) has
d) hadn't

To give slightly more context, this type of question sometimes makes use of a short dialogue, with one person saying something and the other person responding.

A way of testing short answers and responses is to give the testees and utterance, and have them decide which of four or five utterances is an appropriate response. This can be either a test of comprehension or a test of grammar. For example,

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"I think that tuition is much too high here."
a) I do so.
b) Do I so.
c) I so do.
d) So do I.

Another way to test grammatical knowledge using multiple choice items is to give testees a sentence and ask them to choose which of four or five alternatives has the same meaning.

"The school should have expelled him."
a) The school didn't expel him, which was wrong.
b) The school expelled him, because it was necessary.
c) The school might have expelled him, if it had known.
d) The school will probably expel him in the near future.

Again this is a test of reading comprehension as well as grammar, but in order to understand the meaning of the sentence, the reader does have to understand the grammar.

The test maker must find a balance between giving enough context and giving too much. One way to give more context and make the language more natural is to give the items in the form of a short reading passage rather than individual sentences. This gives the testees more context and, if the passage is chosen carefully, is also much more interesting than reading individual, uncontextualized sentences. However, it may be more difficult to test a range of grammatical points, since the grammatical points are restricted by the content of the passage.

A variation on this idea is to use a piece of prose written by a non-native English speaker. This is particularly useful for making a grammar test for testees who are all of the same language group, since the errors made by the writer can be used as distracters.

## Error Correction

Error correction items are also useful for testing grammar. An error correction item is one in which the testee is given a sentence with an error. Four words or phrases in the sentence marked with letters, and the testee needs to decide which of the words or phrases has the error. For example,

Most of students believe that they should be getting better grades
A B C
than they are.
D

The teacher may also mix in some sentences that have no errors, and students are required to indicate that there is no error. In addition, the students might be required to correct the error. Errors from students' actual writing are a good source of ideas for this type of exercise.

Items to Test Knowledge of Word/Sentence Order

Other types of items can be used to test testees' knowledge of word order. The traditional way is to present the testee with four alternative word orders. For example,

I wonder how she knows
a) how it costs much.
b) how much it costs.
c) it costs how much.
d) it how much costs.

Another possibility is to give testees the four words and ask them to put the words in order. For example,

I wonder how she knows _____
A. how B. it C. much D. costs /__/__/__/__/

This can also be done in a way that actually requires the writer to do some writing. For example,

I wonder how she knows _____.
how / it /much / costs

Understanding of appropriate sentence order can also be tested in a similar way by giving testees several sentences and asking them to put them in order. This type of test tests knowledge of references, cohesive devices, etc.

Completion Items

Completion items are items in which the testees are asked to fill in blanks in sentences.

For example,

Give the book to _____ woman in the blue dress.

For the purpose of a grammar test, the words which fit in the blanks should be function words, such as articles and prepositions. (Completion items intended to test reading ability or vocabulary knowledge, in contrast, use content words.) The advantage of completion items is that they test production, not just recognition. The disadvantage is that they need to be marked by hand and there will be some cases where the marker needs to make judgements about whether a response is correct. It is not always easy to write items for with there is only one possible answer. Using a piece of continuous prose rather than disconnected sentences is one way of cutting down on possible different interpretations of what goes into a particular blank, but it is probably impossible to entirely eliminate the possibility of different answers.

Also, it is possible to require a phrase instead of a word in each blank. However, while this method presents a more realistic situation, it does become more difficult to mark. While it is probably not realistic for large-scale testing situations, it is something that is useful for classroom teachers who want to help their students develop an ability to produce appropriate grammatical forms in context.

Transformation Items

Another type of grammar item makes use of transformations. In this type of item, testees are given a sentence and the first few words of another sentence to change the original sentence without changing the meaning. For example,

1. Jim hasn't been home in a long time.
It's been a long time _____.

2. I don't need to go to the grocery store this week.
It isn't _____.

3. It is difficult to study when it is so noisy.
Studying _____.

There are variations on these this type of item in which the word which starts the transformed sentence is underlined, or the testee is given one word to use in the new sentence. For example,

I don't need to go to the grocery store this week. (necessary)

Again, this type of test is difficult to grade because the teacher has to be aware of the variety of possible answers. Another problem is that it does not in any way test the testees' knowledge of when each of the possible transformations would be most appropriate. For example, the testee might be perfectly able to transform an active sentence to a passive sentence but not know when to use passive rather than active. However, it is useful still sometimes a useful test of grammatical knowledge.

Word Changing Items

Another type of item is one in which the testees are given a sentence and a word which they need to fit into the sentence by changing the form of the word. For example,

1. I have never _____ to Australia. (be)
2. I will be with you _____. (moment)

This type of grammar test item tests students' knowledge of different word forms and how they are used in sentences.

Sentence Combining Exercises

Sentence combining exercises can play a part in testing grammar as well as its more traditional use as part of composition testing and training. For example, testees might be instructed to combine the following sentences using a relative pronoun.

I met a man.
The man went to the same high school I did.

(*I met a man who went to the same high school I did.*)

Summary

While the testing of grammatical knowledge is limited--it does not necessarily indicate whether the testee can use the grammatical knowledge in a communicative situation--it is sometimes necessary and useful. When considering the testing of grammar, the teacher has to make decisions about such factors as ease of marking, the degree of control, and the degree of realism.